The Cathedral of Winter

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PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

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Katioka, Abraytha Janus Colefia's specially-crafted Void Ship, was hurtling through the Hollow — his favoured term for one of the many chasms between dimensions. All the while, its pilot was turning switches and knobs, altering settings on the extra-cerebral interfaces covering the walls. Just a few minutes ago, part of the exterior of the Ship had collided with some kind of rupture in the underlying fabric of the Hollow, which, according to the reports blaring out all over the interfaces, had been caused by some kind of concurrent "crisis in the nature of Christmas itself", whatever *that* meant. Whatever the case, it was becoming increasingly obvious that some vital component of *Katioka* had been rendered inoperable in the onslaught. Abraytha prayed it wasn't one of the parts he'd directly stolen from the Dead Weathermen, or, Heaven forbid, salvaged from the corpse of a Greater Time Elemental. But before there could be any question of replacing the damaged part, he'd need to attempt a rather abrupt sort of strategic landing.

A hundred floors away, the heart of *Katioka* was slowly bleeding out, staining the floor with raw *saeculions* — an exotic time particle found only in the Harpsmasher's Manger and related realities. With every drop, the Ship died a little more, and the chances of once again reaching the Hollow, not to mention the true Void Between Worlds, was ever-diminishing.

* * *

Today, on one particular drop in the sea of alternity, was the Solstice. Every inch of ground was covered in a thin layer of soft white snow, coating the usual mix of greens and browns.

Xiantio was used to these natural sights. They were a young winterian, with a pair of feline ears sticking up atop their head instead of the usual rounded ones at the side — and they had lived all their life in these woods, which surrounded the Archons' citadel. For as long as Xiantio could remember, cold wonders had loomed in the distance, cutting a jagged shape over the blue-green trees. And yet, this was the first time such things intruded upon their life — for, all at once, the air in the tundra forests shuddered, and a colossal boat surged into view.

The ship was unlike anything Xiantio had seen, though its dysfunctional philosophy of design would have been oddly familiar to any Earthling

well-versed in the steampunk movement of the early 21st century. Its huge shape blocked out the view of the distant Cathedral, which was fine by Xiantio, who had never been much for the Archons of Winter's method of governance.

The ship's oddity, however, was nothing compared to the helmsman — a short, satyr-like almost demonic-looking with ram-horns extruding from his head. He might have been menacing, if he had not been wearing a red and dark blue chequered jacket which clashed unpleasantly with his pair of beige trousers, not to mention the simply outrageous yellow belt which did its best to tie the look together. Xiantio, mindful of their ear, was not one to judge, but the unlikelihood of the whole was certainly testing them.

* * *

Stepping out of his ship — which he *had* landed, not crashed, thank you very much — Abraytha noticed an odd-looking humanoid with cat-like auricles extruding from their head. He frantically climbed down the ladder bridging the gap between *Katioka* and the outside world, jumping the last few rungs. Turning around, he extended a welcoming hand to the alien.

"Ah, hello, young… lady?… ah, good afternoon or whatever it is, how are you doing," he said brusquely, and then bowed. The intonation was slightly off; it didn't *sound* like a question. "Ahem, who do I have the pleasure…?" he added, and *that* seemed to call for an answer.

Taken quite aback, a quizzical look made its way across the alien's face, until they decided to play along and see what this traveller was and if they could have any fun with them:

"I — I'm Xiantio, Apprentice of Winter under the Archon Ruthquigwalle."

"Apprentice of what? Of Winter?" An expression of intense bewilderment passed over Abraytha's faintly goat-like face. "What did you — Quick-waggle? Who-what-huhhm?"

Xiantio was similarly dumbfounded by this stranger's lack of cultural awareness — surely any off-worlder capable of *reaching* Evestaar would have

researched its culture? Nevertheless, they decided to be understanding, and began to explain.

"This is Evestaar. From here the Archons of Winter govern the dimension of winter throughout the Universe, hiding within their Cathedral of Winter."

"*Dimension* of winter?"

"Well, you see, five principles were laid down in the Great Days of —"

Xiantio's elaboration had done naught but increase Abraytha's confusion; he held up a hand to prevent further 'explanations', and instead summarised his own predicament.

"You seem like fun," Xiantio said with a glance up at Abraytha's horns, once he had heard the short and woeful tale. "And we do receive our fair amount of extra-universal visitors, it's not uncalled for… Alright, how do you think we could save this ship of yours?"

Abraytha's face lit up in clear glee, and his wings flapped about slightly, causing a nearby branch to drop its inventory of snow all over the pair, who subsequently laughed, softly.

Once he'd finished brushing most of the snow off himself, Abraytha began.

"My ship, *Katioka*," Abraytha began, having brushed most of the snow off himself, "isn't able to start by itself, so I would need some artefact from this world which is capable of dimensional travel — or the permission from whoever's in charge in this patch of reality — Creator, Supreme Being, Guardian, what-have-you — to tune into its fine structure, if that's any easier — *Katioka* should still be able manage such a simple manoeuvre."

Xiantio looked like they were mulling over the matter, and then, quite unexpectedly, asked Abraytha if he'd like to rest in their cottage, keep warm from the cold and all that, whilst they figured out what to do. He happily obliged, and Xiantio led the way through the forest — Abraytha had quickly climbed back up his ladder to lock the door of his ship, before gliding down after Xiantio.

"So, dimension-boy, you never told me your name," said Xiantio, as they walked.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, I'm Abraytha Janus Colefia."

He had said the name *Colefia* with a particular emphasis, prompting Xiantio to raise an eyebrow and perk up an ear.

"Oh yes," Abraytha elaborated, mistaking Xiantio's inquisitiveness for recognition. "I am the son of Yophese Colefia." Xiantio blinked, and Abraytha began to catch on. "Surely you know of her? The great time-explorer? *And* academic!"

"Nope, sorry," Xiantio admitted. "I've never even *heard* of anybody called Yosephine.""

"*Yophese* Colefia," Abraytha corrected, "bore witness to the second expulsion of our home, the Gieakraal, from the Bellbreaker's Cradle, *and* she popularised her own edition of *The Cosmography of the Bellbreaker's Cradle and Related Worlds Thereof* — that is why it is often referred to as simply *Yophese's Cosmography*."

Some part of Abraytha had obviously expected all *this* to impress Xiantio, even without prior context. Unfortunately, it did not, but they decided to nod politely.

"Mmm…'kay." They became keenly aware of how unconvincing their stab at enthusiasm had seemed, and hurried to change the subject. "So… the Bellbreaker's Cradle, what's that?"

"Oh, it's the Dead Weathermen's designation," he replied off-handedly, "for the reality of the, ahm — you know, them. The *Grigori*?" Seeing Xiantio's look of confusion, Abraytha continued - "Oh, you wouldn't know who they were, would you? Ah, well, they Mapped our part of the Universe out of it all during their early history — our gods had to bail us out, toss us into a parallel universe, where we remained until… Really, this is the most appalling — have you really heard *none* of this? This lack of context is completely throwing off — oh, fiddlesticks." Abraytha searched for a socially-accepted question, and

beamed childishly when he finally thought of one. "What's your favourite book?"

Xiantio smiled, finally on familiar ground.

"Hmm, difficult question. Probably *Of the City of the Saved…*, or maybe *The Strange Aeon Whence Death Did Die*. What about — oh, we're here."

Xiantio opened the door to their cottage, leading Abraytha in behind her. They went on into the kitchen, leading Abraytha a bit bewildered on what to do next.

"Oh, just wait in there, sit yourself down, I'll bring out some refreshments — do you like tea?"

"Why do you as — oh, you want to *give* me some! Right, right. Ahem — that is —" Abraytha had to think for a while, not quite prepared for the level of compassion Xiantio was giving him. "Yes, please. No milk."

After a short while, during which Abraytha examined various paintings hung all over the wall, Xiantio returned with the teas, and some surprise cake.

"Oh, *thank* you."

"Not a problem, my dear —" They weren't entirely sure where *that* had come from, and felt their cheeks getting warmer.

Abraytha politely ignored the winterian's red face, and took his mug from her. As Xiantio sat down, Abraytha took a fork to the cake.

"I *say*!" the little man marvelled. "Stuff me in an oven and call me a crumpet, but this is *delicious*!"

Xiantio beamed; they'd baked it themself that morning. They went on to talk about many things, involving both their respective traditions involving what Xiantio simply called "the Solstice", but which Abraytha referred to as the "Winter Solstice". In the vast majority of universes he'd travelled to, after all, it was not always Winter — a fact which shocked and confused Xiantio; much of their talk, past that point, concerned how one was meant to live without snow; where did the water come from, if not melted snow? From the river. But how did you — ? Oh, from a river that was *not* frozen over; what a

thought. And what purpose did fires have during this "sum-murr"? Ahm, not much, really. And how, and why, and what…

Throughout it all, however, they found the time for brief asides in which to discuss the, by all accounts, rather more pressing matter of possible methods of gaining an official grant to leave the universe. They'd brushed aside the possibility of acquiring standard cross-universal technology quite early on; Xiantio's people didn't seem to use it, despite being visited on occasion. Partaking in multiversal travel simply didn't seem to be something which interested them — which confused Abraytha as much as a world without snow confused Xiantio.

Xiantio had gone into some detail about how the legendary Satteurn had sent an army of shambling Ministers of the Cold to seize the Key to Winter from the Guardian of Light in the Winter Months, and the Guardian of Darkness and Mayhem, who had held it "since time immemorial" — whatever *that* meant. Sattuen, the Papal Frost, had then melted this Key to Winter down in his cauldron, producing the many Artefacts of Satteurn, including, most importantly at the moment, the Belt of Satteurn. If rumour and myth were to be believed, it was this Belt which still held within itself the Authority of the Guardians — for all that their conqueror, Sateurn, had long since passed away, handing his Artefacts and their implied authority down through an anonymous line of figureheads.

By this time they had gone through around 3 cups of tea, and four slices of cake.

"So, to surmise," Abraytha began, "we need to break into the Cathedral, find this Belt, and flee back to *Katioka*?"

"…Yes," confirmed Xiantio.

It dawned on Abraytha that he hadn't mentioned Xiantio leaving and returning to the cottage; he didn't correct this, not wanting to confirm either way whether they planned to stay or not.

"How, exactly, are we planning on breaking into said Cathedral?" queried Abraytha.

"Oh, that's simple. We just dress up as Snowmen and walk right in! I've got a pair of adhesive coats, cover them with snow… The Cathedral's guard is always admitting Snowmen, they're apparently some part of the pact set down between Satteurn and the Guardians, or something… Point is, Snowmen can get in hey-presto!"

Abraytha stared for a moment.

"Xi, your world is *weird*. Really, really god-damn weird. You know that, don't you?"

Xiantio just looked amused. "Right! Let's get these costumes ready!"

Whilst Xiantio rummaged in the closets for their two adhesive coats, Abraytha shovelled the snow outside into a large pile.

"Hey-oo!" shouted Xiantio, causing Abraytha to drop his shovel of snow and fall over into it in surprise.

"Wa —" He started to get back up, "Ah, hello!"

Xiantio helped him up the rest of the way, handing him a coat; they both began covering them in snow. After around half an hour, they had completed their snow-fits, and put them on with considerable trepidation.

* * *

Deep within the Cathedral of Winter, the Archons were analysing the tundral patterns of the universe, evaluating new ways in which they could exploit Creation — ready for Fimblewinter, which their soothsayers had warned was on the horizon.

The Ephemeral Representation for Satteurn and his Will, more commonly known as simply Their Ephemeral Representation, was, in fact, busy devising a scheme to rid his world of the "filthy" Jack Frosts and Snowmen, purporting that their coexistence on Evestaar was antithetical to the supreme dominion over the Wintry. It was to this end that the standing Lieutenant of Their Ephemeral Representation was on his way down to the entry-hall of the Cathedral, the Snow-ridden Anteroom, to inform the guards that they should no longer admit Snowmen, tradition be damned!

* * *

Huddling close together, purportedly for warmth against the snow they were wearing, Abraytha and Xiantio headed towards the Cathedral. Passing a great tree — a willow, it seemed — they encountered a Jack Frost.

"Hello!" shouted Xiantio through the snowstorm which was steadily increasing in intensity.

The Frost stared back at them for a while, before replying: "You headed for the Towers of Satteurn?"

"Indeed!" shouted back Abraytha, presuming that to be another name for the Cathedral of Winter, once presided over by Satteurn.

"I hear Their Ephemeral Representation is —" the Frost was interrupted by a sudden blizzard, cutting between the two parties.

"What?" shouted both Abraytha and Xiantio.

After a few seconds, the haze of flurrying snow seemed to waver, and they again glimpsed the lithe figure of the frosty humanoid — he had cupped his hands around his mouth, and tried again to shout his warning, but another gust of wind blew in.

"Old chap, we can't *hear* y—…!…" Abraytha shouted uselessly into the whirlwind of snow and ice, but he could barely hear himself, and understood at once that the Jack had no meaningful chance of doing so under the circumstances. He looked at Xiantio. "You. You have good ears, don't you? Do you know what he —"

"My ears are half-frozen and full of *snow*!" the winterian complained. "But I'll tell you what I do know — staying in this blizzard would do more harm than good. Come along."

With a sharp nod from Abraytha, the pair pressed on towards the Cathedral.

* * *

The Head Guard passed on the Lieutenant's message to the rest of the guard.

* * *

There it was, the Cathedral. They walked up to the grand gates, and…

"Sorry, snowflufs, you're not allowed in any more," one guard said.

"What?" Xiantio briefly panicked, before continuing, "But — but it's a sacred tradition, it goes all the way back to Great Satteurn! You can't disrespect the Lord Founder!"

"Why not? Satteurn ain't 'ere, is he?"

"This is blasphemy!" bellowed Xiantio, trying to barge past.

Abraytha grabbed their arm, pulling them back, "Sorry, just a bit of a misunderstanding, won't bother your chillinesses any longer"

The guards were quite baffled by the honourific, which had never been in use within the Frostbiter's Crib, but before they could comment on it, the strange Snowmen had gone.

They reached a side of the Cathedral, and leant against one of the Seven Towers.

"Okay — what shall we do now?" asked Abraytha.

"I'm not sure…" Xiantio caught their breath. Running within the suits was *hard*. "Guess we'll have to go for a proper break-in."

"Oh, dear, oh dear," Abraytha muttered as he nodded his assent. "Yes, I suppose so. Dear me. Well, we could round back to *Katioka*, look for some tools. Might have something to get us through the wall…"

Xiantio shook their head.

"We couldn't go all that way back through the blizzard," she explained. "Besides, this dimension is alien to you, who's to say your tools would do anything?"

So they walked around the walls, looking for imperfections. None could be found, every inch was as cold, as smooth, as fine as a slate of ice. In fact…

No. It couldn't be. Could it?

He took a deep breath, and asked Xiantio. He counted it as a great testament to his mental discipline that he kept his cool when he heard the answer.

"Oh yes, it *is* ice! The Cathedral of Winter, built out of ice," Xiantio commented. "Satteurn and his compatriots needed it to be narratively fitting to please the true Guardians, after all."

"Why," Abraytha simply said — then repeated the first word, trying very hard not to raise his voice — "*why,* Xiantio, didn't you mention this to me before."

"Sorry, just such an ingrained part of my culture I didn't even consider you wouldn't —"

"Yes, yes, of course, yes, naturally," he angrily waved off, avoiding their gaze for fear of saying something he might regret. "Well. Anyway. I certainly have heating equipment back in *Katioka*. So long as it isn't totally dead by now, we should be able to *melt* our way in. So, back there after all."

Xiantio looked reluctant, doubtless not looking forward to the trek through the blizzard and back again — but agreed it was likely the best option.

And thus, slowly and painfully, with the ice in the storm starting to pierce their clothes like knives, they made their way back, passing by the great willow.

In the distance Abraytha could just about make out the silhouette of his gargantuan Ship. His eyes lit up in glee, although they were still husks of what they had been mere hours earlier.

As the silhouette grew near, the trees above the pairs' heads obscured it, meaning that when they finally reached it, Abraytha walked right into the ladder.

"Ow!" he screamed.

Xiantio patted their companion on the shoulder, smiling gently. He smiled back, and began climbing, signalling Xiantio to follow.

Once at the top, Abraytha balanced precariously, withdrawing the key from his back pocket, and unlocking the door. He swung around and into the opening corridor, followed quickly by Xiantio.

"I'm gonna glide down to Level 17, near *Katioka*'s furnace-heart — think I should be able to find a simple flamethrower —"

"Flame… *thrower*?" Xiantio repeated. Abraytha's succinct explanation of the device's functionality did nothing to resolve her bafflement. "Where does that much fire *come from?* It's so hard to —"

"Fire dimension," Abraytha said gruffly.

"What?"

"I get it directly from the Fire Dimension," he elaborated. "A universe made of fire."

"…Really."

"You'll never know!" he said airily as he began walking again. "Point is, stop getting surprised all the time; trust me, there's enough fire in the Multiverse to go round everyone."

Xiantio frowned, but didn't reply.

Abraytha began to look more nervous, wondering if he'd gone too far.

"So, ahm, you wanna come, old thing?"

Xiantio beamed, and walked with Abraytha to the balcony on the other side of the archive, off the main corridor.

"So," Xiantio asked, looking down — "how are we gonna do this?"

"Just…" Abraytha said vaguely, and put his arms out in front of him, implying that he meant for Xiantio to stand between them. They did so; he held them tight —

— and toppled off the balcony.

Xiantio screamed. They were falling, falling faster than they'd ever fallen before, falling with no indication of slowing down. This man they had just met, this demon, he was killing them, he was killing himself, they were both going to die —

And then, it stopped; not with the horrible *splat* she had expected, but something altogether stranger. It felt as if they had both been *yanked* upward by an invisible force. They'd slowed down so *fast*. It took Xiantio a moment to realise what it was:

Abraytha had *wings*, and after a good ten seconds, he had spread them out. They were now gliding.

Xiantio smiled. That had been *fun*, if incredibly terrifying.

* * *

They landed down on Level 17, sprawled in a mess on top of one another, before quickly getting up again, and dusting themselves off.

"Right! Through here," said Abraytha, not leaving a moment for Xiantio to recover.

Together they searched through shelf upon shelf. Eventually, they found it, in the inauspiciously-named Sort *12Q4B** — the flamethrower. The large, red implement had originally belonged to a group of firefighters from Universe 1486257(A-62785)*, where such people didn't fight *against* fire, but rather *for* fire. It was, in Abraytha's opinion, better for everyone that it be kept in safe hands, such as those of a dimension-hopping demon; and that was where it had sat ever since he'd stolen it from their backroom. Standing on a stepladder, he lifted it from the high shelf, passing it down to an unsuspecting Xiantio, who nearly fell over from the unexpected weight, but saved themself. Abraytha didn't seem to even notice, jumping down from his step-ladder with a quick beat of his leathery wings, and taking the flamethrower back.

"I suppose we'll have to take the lift this time," he commented. "This thing has a bit of weight to it."

"*There was a lift this entire time?*" shouted Xiantio, exasperated.

"Yes, well —" Abraytha spluttered; he had not expected Xiantio's anger, though he understood it now. "Well, really. Wasn't flying *much* more *fun?"*

Xiantio didn't respond, not being able to bring themself to disagree, but not wanting to prove Abraytha right. Unfortunately, Abraytha took that as a sign of defeat.

"Well, there y'are, then," he said with a pleased little huff.

Abraytha led the way to the lift, passing along multiple grated floors, and machinery —- some of which had the distinct impression of *being alive* — until they finally reached the lift. The three of them, Abraytha, Xiantio, and the flamethrower, were slightly cramped, mainly due to the extraneous length of the flamethrower — its *length*, more than its overall size. The firefighters of Universe 1486257(A-62785)* had been *tall.*

Ding. They had arrived on the top floor, the lift racing up the intermediary with just enough time for the two to talk but not get bored.

"Race you!" Xiantio shouted, running down the corridor, out of the door, and beginning to climb down the ladder.

"No fair —" began Abraytha, and then made chase, reaching the door just as Xiantio reached the forest floor, and ran away into the night of the Solstice.

Abraytha jumped down, landing in the semi-soft snow but still lightly bruising himself, and ran after her.

* * *

Their Ephemeral Representation dug through the Official Vaults, and withdrew the Belt of Satteurn, ready to wear it the next time he addressed his assembly — as *The Eternal Representation*.

* * *

He couldn't see her. The earlier blizzard had quieted down, but now a heavy shrouding darkness had descended to envelop everything around the

Cathedral of Winter. He didn't even know which way to head for the sacred fortress.

Increasingly close to panicking, he shouted for Xiantio.

No response. "XI-AN-TIO!" he shouted again, more slowly.

Footsteps. He turned around — was it Xi, or was it some creature, a malformed Snowman, a Jack, come to frost him over?

"XYYYY-AAAHHN-TEEE-OHH!"

The entity crept around the back of *Katioka* —

Abraytha let himself fall to the floor, distraught and losing almost every ounce of belief that he'd make it to the Cathedral, let alone retrieve the Belt and bring it back here.

"Boo!"

Abraytha screamed, shuffling backwards, heart racing. Then he saw Xiantio's face, modelled in shadow against the dark sky.

"What in the — don't do th — you terrified the life out of me, you little… you little…!"

They looked apologetic, but mouthed "You did it first, flying-man". Abraytha blinked — and smiled genially. He got up again, and playfully gave them a light punch to the arm.

"Yes, you have a point there," he sighed. "So, which way to the Cathedral?"

"Uh… this way, I think," said Xiantio, taking a torch out from their pocket and shining it ahead.

They walked on through the snowy night, passing again by the great willow tree. Once the Towers of the Cathedral were in sight, they moved around to the side, circling in towards the Third Tower. As they drew nearer, the nature of the task really began to weigh down upon Xiantio; why were they doing this? They pushed the thought aside; if they didn't do this, the monotony of the Wintry would encompass them until they were no more.

They reached the Tower, and Abraytha knelt down, laying the flamethrower on his knee. He looked over at Xiantio, who nodded in affirmation.

* * *

As night was near halfway done, the guards of the Cathedral were switching over. One guard, walking back from his station, positioned a few yards from the still-snow-ridden Anteroom, glimpsed what looked like two figures, one holding a gun-like appliance rested against his knee. He stopped, causing his comrade to bump into him from behind.

"What was that for?" the comrade growled, irritated.

"There's… some people there."

"Yeah? Well, that's for next shift's chumps to figure out," the other guard insisted. "C'mon."

Reluctantly, the first guard continued walking into the Anteroom, but not before stealing a second glance at the figures — only to find them gone, their "gun" lying innocently on the ground. At that moment, he almost broke line and chased after them, but didn't, knowing he would be punished for breaking routine.

* * *

They were in — inside the Cathedral. Abraytha had expected something more other-worldly, but it was just like one of the grand churches back on Gieakron, the primary planet of the Gieakraal. Moreover, this wasn't the architecture at its best and most opulent, by any means; they'd emerged into what appeared to be a simple servants' corridor, connecting parts of the Cathedral together. Connecting parts of the Cathedral….

"Xiantio!"

She almost fell over in surprise, the hallway being otherwise so silent. "What!?"

"The High Archons of Winter probably want their servants to be able to reach every part of the Cathedral, so that they can attend to their every whims. Don't they? *Please* tell me the High Archons are incredibly lazy?"

"I wouldn't *know*, really, I've never been here before…" Xiantio hesitated. "But the way they act around the rest of Evestaar… Yeah, you're right, I'd be quite surprised if that wasn't how they ticked."

Abraytha smiled mischievously, and started. Xiantio ran to keep up.

"How are you going to find Their Ephemeral Representation's room in all this?"

"Top of the highest tower — the 'First' Tower, I expect?" he deduced, speed-walking past ice-sculpted pictures of the Wintry fighting the ever-fabled Summery in their War of Seasons. Xianto huffed, trying again to catch up. Abraytha was right, of course, but it would have been nice of him to turn around and actually check that she had nodded.

They walked on, ever upwards. A few times, they heard the sounds of guards approaching, and so hid behind drapes covering a nearby window, or round a corner. But they were never caught.

They reached the First Tower, sneaking in through the open door with total ease; *too* total, in fact.

Guards descended from all around, some appearing to melt straight out of the ice-walls, others falling from the open roof.

A statue, standing in the middle of the room, cracked, and turned around, revealing the Eternal Representation.

Abraytha and Xiantio froze — not literally, but they suspected that if they let the guards get their hands on them, it would become literal. Abraytha scanned the room for anything that might be termed a Belt of Satteur, and came up empty. That was, until his gaze landed back upon the tall, imposing man standing before him; he was wearing a red-and-green belt. Abraytha glanced back at Xiantio, pointing out the belt with his eyes; they nodded. It was, indeed, *the* Belt.

The guards closed in, weighing up their spears in their hands.

Xiantio stepped forward, extending feline claws from their hands, and began to thrash out at the nearest guard. Only slightly shocked, she jabbed her spear out at them, cutting their arm slightly; they recoiled, stumbling back. But only for a moment — they began running around the legs of the guards, cutting them all very slightly with their nails, but moving away too quickly for any of them to get Xiantio back.

"Abraytha!"

Oh, right. Abraytha refocused.

All this time, the Eternal Representation had just been standing there, quite confounded by Xiantio's skill. Now, seeing Abraytha make eye contact, he reciprocated, ready for an attack…

And his trousers fell down.

Whilst he'd been starring intently at Abraytha, Xiantio had used their catlike claws to break a fibre in the legendary Belt — one would think Sattuern's imperial weavers would have made it from sturdier stuff, but it would appear they were more concerned with how its threads tuned into the intrinsic harmonies of spacetime, than with material resistance; and it was a respectable number of millions of years old, besides.

Abraytha stared ahead for a second, quite appalled by Xiantio, before hastily picking up the Belt, and pelting from the room, trusting Xiantio to follow. All of the guards ran after him, leaving Xiantio alone with the Representation. He turned around to meet her gaze, his face contorted with helpless menace.

She held up their claws to strike him across the face, but he saw her coming, and punched them in the nose. Blood trickled down, but they ignored the pain and turned to *run*, spinning on their heels to swerve around in a circle and right out of the tower. On their face, the blood was drying already with exposure to the cold winter air, painting their visage with streaks of dark red. Now if only they could avoid the guard as they chased Abraytha.

Oh no, Abraytha…

He'd made it out of the First Tower, jumping out of a window and landing atop the smallest tower, the Fifth, and slightly cutting his knee on the floor. He quickly got up again, running down the spiral staircase, and back into the servants' corridor. The guards had jumped out of the tower after him, but many of them fell down to the ground, breaking their legs, with only a few making it to the Fifth Tower to continue their pursuit.

Xiantio ran from the First Tower, and, seeing that there were no guards — although not noticing they'd all jumped out the window — continued down the stairs of the First Tower, walking through the main corridors of the Cathedral. They made it all the way into the entrance hall, before finally being confronted by a guard.

"Oi! What'cha doing here!?" the guard bellowed.

Xiantio panicked, and decided to just keep walking.

"Stop, I tell you!"

The guard started to walk towards her, accelerating.

Xiantio sped up, and started running. The Anteroom was in sight; they could see the frozen forestlands beyond. The guard behind them was catching up. The guards in the anteroom turned around to face them. They passed the anteroom's threshold, and slid past the guards, landing on the snow outside.

* * *

Abraytha continued running from the few guards still chasing him, the Belt of Satteurn held firmly in his grasp. He stopped for breath, glancing behind himself, and noticed that the guards were still quite close — getting closer, in fact — he could see an open window.

Ah, well, worked last time….

He had misjudged the height, and had no time to spread out his wings after squeezing himself through the slightly narrow opening — but fell directly on-top of Xiantio, who cushioned the fall even more than the snow would have done.

The guards did not stop, however, and so the two had to pick themselves up, and continue running. By unspoken agreement, they split up, Xiantio running to the left, and Abraytha to the right, and the guards — by now, a sum total of five — followed them both. It was still the dead of night, however, and so the guards couldn't see well enough to follow. The darkness was, of course, no help to the thieves either, but then, for the time being they had only to lose their pursuers; getting lost as well was an unfortunate, but acceptable loss. They could worry about trivial matters such as 'finding their way back to the Ship they'd retrieved this Belt for in the first place' *after* they were once again confident in the length of their foreseeable lifespan.

After a good half-hour of dodging and weaving, Xiantio and Abraytha each found themselves alone, as far from each other as they were from the guards. Separated by mountains of snow from all hope of reaching one or another, the ship, or, indeed, Xiantio's cottage. Each, in turn, slowed down — and shivered.

From Abraytha's perspective, a figure appeared in the distance.

"Hey!" he shouted.

At first they appeared not to hear, but then he shouted again, louder this time, "Hey!"

The figure turned around. Their face was frost-blue, but not unnatural-like, it was more like…

"Oh! Jack Frost, nice to see you again!"

The Frost rolled their eyes. "Name's Adeline Icicle, *actually*. But, yes, what is it? Oh, you're that guy from earlier, the one who wanted to see the Cathedral, you were with that w —"

"Yes, yes, quite right. Do you know where they are? Or their house? I need to get back there, and see them again."

"Ugh," Adeline groaned. "Kinda busy. Can't you just look around yourself?"

"…it's pitch black, I can barely see you?" said Abraytha, his voice wavering.

"Oh, I forgot you Jills can't see in the dark… Alright then, follow me," Adeline said, reluctantly.

Abraytha, following, wondered why Adeline had called him 'a Jill'. Jill, Jill, that rung a bell. *Jack and Jill*… oh yes! A nursery rhyme, a legend from Old Earth, in the Bellbreaker's Cradle. Why this particular culture would share such a random facet eluded him, but he supposed he shouldn't find it any more peculiar than the fact that there existed Jack Frosts at all, or that these Archons of Winter he had just robbed bore so many striking similarities to the ever-reproachable Archons of Time.

* * *

Xiantio had never thought they'd die like this. If anyone was going to freeze to death on the Solstice, surely it should have been that unwary stranger, used to fire and heat growing on trees. Perhaps he was freezing too, come to that. Probably. And they weren't there to save him, after everything he'd done for her — admittedly in the course of a ridiculous adventure that *he*'d pulled them into, but Xiantio bore him no ill will. She just wished she had a bit more strength. Enough to crawl back to civilisation, get some help… If she found the stranger's ship, she wondered if she could steer it to his rescue. He'd said that it had a heart; perhaps it was alive. Perhaps it could find its master, if only she could… but that was a hollow dream. She fell to her knees in the snow, unable to go on, ready to give up —

— and saw two figures appear in the distance, getting larger.

"Abraytha?!" they called out, in a rather meek voice, having had their strength significantly sapped by the cold. One of the figures ran towards her, and as they got closer they saw that, indeed, it *was* Abraytha! They smiled with wild abandon.

The second figure caught up, and she recognised *them* with ease, too.

"Oh, you!" she addressed the Jack Frost. "Did you bring him here? Thank you so much,I —" Xiantio began

"Aight, bye" replied Adeline, clearly not very invested in the situation.

"No, wait!" Xiantio and Abraytha both shouted. Adeline turned around.

"C-can you take us back to Xiantio's cottage?"

Adeline looked bemused. "I don't know where they live, now do I?"

"Oh…"

Adeline walked off, leaving the pair alone in each other's arms, in the cold wintry night. But it seemed Abraytha had heat enough for the both of them, and the cold had done no hold on him, save psychological. What a silly, ridiculous, wonderful creature he was. She laughed at the realisation; he didn't know why, they supposed.

* * *

The sun pierced Abraytha's eyes, waking him. He looked all around, finally being able to see again.

There, not a hundred yards away, lay *Katioka*.

"Oh, of course, terrific," he grumbled with good humour — then smiled as his senses returned to him fully, and he felt the colder, thinner mass still clinging onto his compact frame as though he were a heating pillow. "Wake up, Xy-ti", he said, kicking Xiantio lightly on the side.

She slowly awoke in turn, clearly still exhausted from the previous night.

"Hhwwhhat?" they mumbled.

"*Katioka*, my ship — it's just over there!"

Xiantio's eyes flew open. "It's what!?"

Abraytha nodded in mutual understanding of the irony, and signalled for them to follow him toward there.

"We can rest more once we get to'er, I've got many a good bed in there. You can stay in the snow if you want, but I'm definitely going."

"Okay, okay," Xiantio agreed, reluctant but fully aware that they'd freeze without him.

They walked. With the darkness and the menace gone, the woods were once again the welcoming home she had always known. And yet…

After a short while, they took his hand in theirs.

"I want to come with you, away from here, in *Katioka*." she said. Abraytha didn't reply, but simply nodded, quite minorly.

To Xiantio, it felt like an hour, although Abraytha later insisted it was only around 10 minutes, but whichever way — they eventually reached the stepladder leading up to *Katioka*, near collapse at that point. Abraytha climbed up first, followed shortly by Xiantio.

"So, where does this Belt need to go, anyway?"

"There's a special room in the furnace-heart for these kinds of relics. Would you like to come with me, or rest?"

"To be honest, I'd really like to rest some more."

"No problem, follow me."

Abraytha led Xiantio down the corridor, to a large bedroom with a king-sized, four-poster bed. She immediately collapsed onto it, falling into a deep sleep.

Abraytha, Belt in hand, jumped off the balcony in the archive room, and glided down to the furnace-heart — landing gracefully, and continuing to walk with no interruption, toward the Room for Relics Capable of Granting the User Leave to Depart That Particular Reality. For such a specific category, it was slightly surprising that he already had three items in there. These were of no prolonged use, definitionally, however, so he'd just kept them stacked away in a cabinet at the side. The centre of the room was the important part: a red cushion with a dozen specialist nerves, connecting the properties of the relic sitting there to *Katioka*'s own cerebral cortex, interspersed throughout its structure.

He placed the Belt of Satteurn on the red cushion, and heard the sounds of *Katioka* connecting itself into the metaphysical structure of this universe, ready to pull itself back into the Hollow. After years and years spent travelling said Hollow — as well as the Morass, Great Black Void, and Outer Void, as well as, on occasion, the Tourbillon — Abraytha could *feel* his ship slowly ascend into it. He found the sensation comforting.

He returned to Xiantio's room to check up on her, and on his way around the bed, saw the window. He couldn't resist the temptation to look out of it — the void was so, *so* beautiful, he felt. Just as he was about to turn away from the window and draw the curtains, he spotted a sleigh bounding across the horizon, seemingly led by reindeer, and with a plump woman and four other humanoids onboard.

I wonder what they*'re up to*…